New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1947

Volume VIII, Number 8 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of April 21, 1947

1947 PRODUCTIONS

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"Message for Margaret"

Complete Reviews appear in this issue

Theatre Critics Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS — NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR — NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
NEW YORK SUN — NEW YORK POST — NEW YORK TIMES

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New York

Theatre Critics' Reviews

Announces

1947 CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD WINNERS

Best Play By An American Author

"All My Sons"

Best Play By A Foreign Author

"No Exit"

Best Musical Play

"Brigadoon"

Complete newspaper reviews of "All My Sons" start on page 475 (1947 volume); of "No Exit" on page 241 (1946 volume); of "Brigadoon" on page 427 (1947 volume.) of **NEW YORK THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS**

"Message for Margaret"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

APRIL 17, 1947

By HOWARD BARNES

A Woeful Message

JAMES PARISH'S "Message for Margaret" has staked a valid claim at the Plymouth to being the most pretentious dramatic nonsense of the season. There may have been worse plays presented than this local production of a current London show. None has had its frailties so hideously exposed. A stout performance by Mady Christians, who was so wonderful in "I Remember Mama," becomes almost painful before a static and windy account of tangled personal relationships reaches a vague climax. Elliott Nugent's direction has a certain insistence on theatrical excitement, but it merely accents the general anemia of a conversation piece. There is a good setting by Donald Oenslager. By the time it serves a frequently telegraphed melodramatic purpose, it is a premise to be fled with no backward gaze.

* * *

The author of this importation is toying with the idea of a wife and mistress quarreling over the ghost of a publisher, who is lucky enough to be killed in an off-stage accident right at the start of the proceedings. The two ladies form a macabre duet founded on hatred. They talk endlessly about the dead guy, push each other around a bit and wind up the best of friends, with the widow dedicating herself to raising the unborn child of her former spouse's inamorata. In case you are wondering about the title, the contestants are each named Margaret.

Miss Christians plays the legal inheritor of grief with all the power that one might expect from an astute actress. Even when Parish has seen fit to have her attempt the murder of her erstwhile rival and succeed only in having the nice husband of the harlot plunge to his death, there is a certain dignity in her portrayal which is inescapable. Unfortunately, hers is a tasteless triumph. Miriam Hopkins, playing the role of the other woman, does little more than walk through a part, which is perhaps the best way to have handled the assignment. Whether they are involved in tedious philosophizing or getting rough, the stars are more ridiculous than believable.

* * *

Roger Pryor has the thankless task of being the go-between between the two Margarets. His frequent entrances and exits lend no more significance to the action than briefly hopeful interruptions. Peter Cookson does what he can as the estranged husband of the exhibitionistic second Margaret and Janice Mars has an anomalous role as a maidservant. The company has short shrift with such a piece of arrant shoddy as "Message For Margaret." A woeful play is exhibited in all its dank boredom at the Plymouth.

'MESSAGE FOR MARGARET.'

Play by James Parish; staged by Elliott Nugent; setting by Donald Oenslager; presented by Stanley Gilkey and Barbara Payne, in association with Henry Sherek, Ltd., at the Plymouth Theater, Wednesday evening, April 16, 1947. The cast:

Margaret Hayden	Mady Christians
Steven Austin	Roger Pryor
Adeline Chalcot	Miriam Hopkins
Robert Chalcot	Peter Cookson
Maid	Janice Mars

SYNOPSIS: Margaret Hayden's apartment in Gramercy Park, New York City. Act I—Scene 1: An evening in February. Scene 2: Late afternoon; a week later. Act II—Scene 1: Wednesday evening, three weeks later. Scene 2: Saturday night. Act III—Scene 1: Sunday morning. Scene 2: Evening of the same day.

The New York Times

APRIL 17, 1947

THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Some potent acting and some elegant garments for ladies are being squandered on some old-fashioned clap-trap in "Message for Margaret," which was put on at the Plymouth last evening. It is the work of an English writer, James Parish; and in London it had a London setting. Out of respect for the patriotism of New Yorkers, the setting in the American version has been transferred to Gramercy Park. Mady Christians and Miriam Hopkins are doing the acting, which is good; and Bergdorf Goodman and Valentina are providing the wardrobes, which are smarter than the play.

* * *

For it is to be feared that "Message for Margaret" is a tawdry tale told with tedious refinement by a bore. When it opens, Margaret Hayden is learning the news of the accidental death of her husband, a roving publisher. His final words, spoken to his well-educated partner, constitute an affectionate message to Margaret. But in the second act it appears that, having a one-track mind, he had called his mistress Margaret also.

This provokes a considerable period of mutual torture while the widow and the mistress are trying to take personal credit for his dying refrain. The legal Margaret is a noble person, despite a lamentable tendency toward homicide; but the extra-legal Margaret is a hussy whose admirable qualities, if any, she cunningly conceals.

An industrious playwright, Mr. Parish takes a fairly complete inventory of all the theatre's old hats while he is setting the ladies to pulling hair. The only surprise is that his play takes so long to announce the happy pregnancy of the mistress and to push one of the characters off a third-story balcony into the midst of a heavily-orchestrated Salvation Army meeting on Sunday morning. By the way, does the Salvation Army hold meetings in Gramercy Park? The Players is the only fruitful address in the neighborhood.

Knowing a good environment when he sees it in a play-script, Donald Oenslager has designed a hospitable Gramercy Park apartment, suitable for a publisher's wife and much too distinguished for the mistress. Amid bookcases and prints, Miss Christians as the widow, Miss Hopkins as the mistress, Roger Pryor as the publisher who has survived and Peter Cookson as a poet and reluctant husband to the mistress—conduct their squalid affairs.

* * *

Under Elliott Nugent's direction, the parts are well acted by people who know their jobs. But it is always a little distressing to watch a fine actress applying all her sincerity to a part that is hardly worth exhibiting in public. Miss Christians plays the widow as honestly as though "Message for Margaret" were not hocus-pocus, but tragedy. While Mr. Parish wallows, she acts with the stature of Hamlet's mother. There is something wrong about such unbalanced proportions.

New York Post

APRIL 17, 1947

'Message for Margaret' Is Just Bad News

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

First-nighters are notoriously tender-hearted about showing an interest in very dubious stage situations. It was expecting too much of them, however, to hope that they would care whether the last thoughts of the late publisher named Hayden were of his wife, Margaret, or of his mistress, Adeline, who, to make things complicated, was sometimes also known as Margaret. That is the central situation in "Message for Margaret," the drama by one James Parrish, which opened at the Plymouth Theatre last night, and it certainly resulted in some of the waning dramatic season's least exciting moments.

All, it appears, would have been well if the arrogant Adeline hadn't insisted on sticking her nose into things, apparently for no other purpose than to get the play started. The philandering publisher, who must have been a dreary fellow, was safely and comfortably dead; his widow was reasonably content in the belief that he had died with her name on his lips, and the mistress was happy in the knowledge that she was the woman he really loved. In that case, though, there would have been no play, which would have been just fine.

The Two Margarets

Instead, Adeline has to go rushing to the widow with the cheery word that her pen name was Margaret and that the husband had been referring to her in his last words. She thinks it is going to be quite a bond between them, but it doesn't seem to work out. There are a lot of dull words passed between the girls, and when they are over the playwright discovers that he still has two acts to go. That is when it really gets punishing.

What do you suppose our author, Mr. Parrish, does at this crucial point? Unless you have a touching faith in the restraint possible to dramatists you will hardly be surprised to learn that the mistress is about to have a baby by the dead publisher, which causes everyone additional wringing of hands. The first thing you know, or, at least, after a few hours, the wife has tried to kill the mistress, the mistress' nice husband falls to his death, and it turns out that the publisher probably did prefer his wife.

Change of Scene

A fine Donald Oenslager set, painstaking Elliott Nugent direction and some good performances are wasted on this dull and irritating nonsense. There is an impressive portrayal of the wife by Mady Christians and a sharply effective characterization of the selfish and incredibly exasperating mistress by Miriam Hopkins. Roger Pryor is properly loyal and fatuous as a family friend and Peter Cookson succeeds in making the unspeakable Adeline's ill-used husband surprisingly human, likeable and sympathetic. In bringing the play from England, the producers changed the locale from London to New York and gave things tone by adding a maid to the cast.

There is almost everything to be said against "Message for Margaret," but the author has achieved one feat. He has created a character that doesn't even appear and made him epically boring.

Daily Mirror

APRIL 17, 1947

New 'Margaret' Play Proves Tedious

By ROBERT COLEMAN

James Parrish's "Message for Margaret," which Stanley Gilkey and Barbara Payne brought to the Plymouth Theatre last evening is so incredible that the author might contend that it really is based on an actual incident.

Truth very often proves more strange than fiction. Anyway, true or not, "Message for Margaret" is a false play. It also is a tedious play, so tedious, in fact, that its ill-fated predecessor at the Plymouth, "The Eagle Has Two Heads," seems in retrospect a veritable dramaturgic delight.

The Margaret in this case is two women—the wife and mistress of book publisher David Hayden. After Hayden had carelessly stepped in front of a speeding car and been taken to the hospital, he, on his death bed, whispered to his partner, Stephen Austin, an affectionate message for Margaret.

Stephen relayed the speech to Margaret Hayden. Hardly had he spoken it when in walked Adeline Chalcot, one of the firm's more prolific and profitable novelists, to reveal that her real name was Margaret and that she was of the opinion that David had preferred her to his wife.

Thereupon the two Margarets settled down to a dull battle of wits over the memory of the departed David. Mistress Margaret scored one on wife Margaret when she discovered herself with child by David. Wife Margaret tried to push brassy mistress Margaret off a balcony and failed.

It's too bad both didn't plunge off and spare the first nighters additional scenes in which mistress Margaret's estranged husband, whom she had persuaded to act the dutiful spouse for society and child's sake, goes to his death from the lethal balcony.

Not even the presence of Mady Christians, Miriam Hopkins, Roger Pryor and Peter Cookson in the cast is able to make Parrish's "Message" important, interesting or rewarding.

Elliott Nugent's direction has Miss Hopkins waggling hands and arms, striking slightly silly poses and mugging for a couple of acts as the mistress. Miss Christians also has some flamboyant moment as the wife. Only in the last act, when they begin to impersonate something resembling human beings do the co-stars turn on the effective and affecting histrionics of which they are capable.

Pryor and Cookson are to be complimented for restraint, but after all they merely served to set off the femme fireworks.

From now on we're going to run, not walk, through the nearest exit when an English play with the word "Margaret" in its title pops onto a stage. "George and Margaret" and "Message for Margaret" have put us on guard. "Message for Margaret" is reported a big hit in London. If so, our British cousins are welcome to it. We prefer to doze in silence.

Journal American

APRIL 17, 1947

'Margaret' Offered At Plymouth Theatre

By ROBERT GARLAND

All right, then, let's try not to use the word "contrived." But if the James Parish play which has followed Jean Cocteau's "The Eagle Has Two Heads" onto the stage of the Plymouth Theatre isn't contrived, I don't know what to call it. The author calls it "Message For Margaret," although "We Remember David" would do almost as well.

Beginning all over again, forgetting the word "contrived," I'm here to tell you that when, in the first scene of the third act, or it may be in the second scene of the second act, the newcomer known as Peter Cookson falls to his death from the balcony of what could be The Players, "Message For Margaret" passes out right along with him.

Then and there, what has begun as a fascinating, if artificial, case history of feminine psychology becomes an artificial, and far from fascinating, melodrama. And Mady Christians and Miriam Hopkins, as the pair of Margarets who remember David, beat their brains out trying to decide which one David loved the dearer.

This, for the record, is the theatre piece which, locale and everything, has been transferred from London to New York in an Americanization credited, as you might say, to Elliott Nugent. Mr. Nugent has added a maid-of-no-work so that a Harvey-like actress called Janice Mars can become the fifth wheel of a contrived—beg pardon, artificial—vehicle.

• • •

Quick Transformation

No sooner has the curtain gone up on Mady Christians' lovely Donald Oenslager drawing-room overlooking Manhattan's Gramercy Park than the artificiality begins. David Hayden has just died off-stage and Roger Pryor, crossing Broadway with him, is an immediate beholder of the fatal mishap. He, friend of the family, tells Mady.

And Mady is suddenly transformed from David Hayden's wife to David Hayden's widow. But, mark you, David had whispered a message for Margaret on his deathbed. "Give my love to Margaret," he gasped. "Bless her for all she has done." These few kind last-words were followed by some apparently senseless verbiage.

Then, the end!

Which is all very well until Miriam Hopkins appears, forcing her attractive way into Mady Christians' parlor. Miriam brings news—and proof—of dear dead David's infidelity. She, in person, has been Mady's husband's mistress for at least two years. And—surprise, surprise—her name also is Margaret, not Adeline or even Lilith.

So, in the course of the plot's unplotting, Mady attempts to erase Miriam by pushing her off a balcony into East 20th Street, which is Gramercy Park South to those who live there. But Mr. Cookson is the one who crashes to his finish. And to the finish of the play. As a double finish, this death is not exaggerated.

• • •

Skillful Acting

On the whole, "Message For Margaret" is acted more skillfully than it deserves. Especially by Miriam Hopkins, who plays the part of Mady Christians' husband's mistress with brittle and relentless honesty. You feel—I do, at any rate—that she knows and understands the character, even if we, as lookers-on, do not.

Mady Christians acts as if she were still concerned with "I Remember Mama." I'd be doing you—and her—a rank disfavor if I pretended that her accent fails to get in her actorial way. But, forgetting it in passing, her role takes on a smugness and maturity which are not becoming, either. But they do explain David's yen for Miriam.

Roger Pryor is required to be charming and little else as a sort of Greek Chorus in modern dress. And he is charming—and little else! The newcomer, Peter Cookson, is what the playwright ordered as Miriam's former husband, a sappy young man-about-town who hates Miriam because he loves her and, before he topples into East 20th Street, assumes responsibility for her unborn illegitimate baby.

Elliott Nugent has directed this with faltering hand against Donald Oenslager's unfaltering background. But, late in the second act, or early in the third, James Parish's play falls down and disappears along with Mr. Cookson. I'm sorry, for "Message For Margaret" should be bigger, brighter and better than it is. And, it really is almost painfully contrived.

The Sun

APRIL 17, 1947

'Message for Margaret,' Dressed-up Thriller, Completely Incredible at Plymouth.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

"Message for Margaret," the five-character play by James Parish that comes to us as a London success, turns out to be a completely incredible melodrama, a weird and jolting mixture of a little of everything. Two of our better actresses, an intelligent director and two reputable producers had a hand, unaccountably enough, in last night's harrowing goings-on at the Plymouth.

The message for Margaret is just this: "Give my love to Margaret—bless her for all she's been to me." It is left by a dying publisher, one David Hayden, just after he has been fatally injured in a street accident. The message is tricky, for the dead man's devoted wife is named Margaret and the shallow, relentless, five-letter creature who was his mistress was also known to him as Margaret.

The discovery of the relations between David and the Other Woman is a shock to the faithful Margaret, but she receives an even greater one when she learns that the mistress is to bear David's child. The wife fails in her attempt to murder her antagonist. And then guess what happens. The mistress's estranged husband, who was going back to her temporarily because of her approaching motherhood, falls from a balcony and is killed—falls over the same broken railing through which Margaret, the wife, had tried to push Margaret, the mistress.

There's still that problem of the unborn child, but an agreement is reached by which it will be turned over to the childless wife. And by this time the mistress, who is casual to a point of caricature, doesn't want it. We never do learn for whom David's farewell message was intended, but last night it didn't seem to matter.

Mady Christians plays the wife and Miriam Hopkins the mistress and it's a rather trying evening for both. I suspect that Miss Christians is miscast. She does succeed, however, in bringing some convictions of the genuine anguish of a woman who deeply loved her husband and who is overwhelmed by a growing hatred for the intruder. Miss Hopkins, stunningly gowned, has some fascinating moments and many others that come fearfully close to old-fashioned melodramatics in her efforts to characterize the monstrous young woman that Adeline Chalcot turns out to be. Roger Pryor and Peter Cookson, in less agonizing assignments, fare better. Cookson's second act scene, in which he tells his demon wife off, is the best in the play. He is very forthright and very believable.

"Message for Margaret," staged by Elliott Nugent and produced by Stanley Gilkey and Barbara Payne, in association with London's Henry Sherek, has been given a fancy Gramercy Park setting by Donald Oenslager. But if he and Playwright Parish had bothered to mend that terrace railing there wouldn't have been much excuse for a play. In fact, there isn't anyway.

"Message for Margaret," a dressed-up thriller, is windy, wordy and rather dreadful.

New York World-Telegram

APRIL 17, 1947

'Margaret' a Brash Melodrama

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Message for Margaret" is an unabashed melodrama in which the principal characters suffer to the hilt. Despite a certain logic and some excellent performances, it often manages to be embarrassing.

The situation causes the players to confront each other in moments of such raw emotion, that the most understated reaction sounds a little ridiculous. This is the sort of brash expression of feeling that is somehow acceptable in costume and another period, yet seems slightly indecent in the present.

Test of Adversity.

This does not mean that the story could not happen now. It could, anytime. But in this time, particularly after the war, one gets the feeling that no one should be allowed to take his selfish passions so seriously.

The theme of the play is that the sincere balanced people of the world suffer the most in adversity, but are dealt with by fate in the end more kindly than the superficial sensationalists.

Margaret's husband, a publisher, has been dead only a week, when she is confronted by Adeline, one of his authors, who announces she was his mistress for two years.

The Final Indignity.

The man's dying message of devotion to Margaret has been published, and Adeline declares warfare for the memory of his love. She has a fair claim on the message, for he called her by her pen name, also Margaret.

This bald and unlikely coincidence serves only to get the two women together. The play deals with the attraction of their jealous hatred, and the violence of their competition.

Adeline is to have the child Margaret has wanted for the 15 years of her marriage. This final indignity turns the normal sorrowful widow into a creature beyond any precepts of morality. The tragic consequences of her unsuccessful attempt to kill Adeline bring them to their senses.

This strained situation is believable enough to begin with, when one considers that Adeline treats all people as laboratory specimens to drain of emotion and toss aside. Developing her relationships leads to moments that are unintentionally laughable.

Playing on her own decamped husband's respect for Margaret, Adeline, in trying to make him return to her to give the child a name, remarks indignantly, "It's *her* husband's child!" Only an Adeline could conceive of such a weapon, but even in her hands it comments comically on the snarled pattern of the play.

Rarified Atmosphere.

It is suspended on friction between such highly specialized persons, that one feels each added incident could happen to no two other people in the world and would never be duplicated. This rarifies the atmosphere to the gasping point.

Mady Christians acts the difficult role of Margaret with poise and dignity, even in her most harrowed moments. Like the fine artist she is, she deals magnificently with the long tricky passages when she is alone on the stage.

Miriam Hopkins is the manipulating Adeline. It is an unsympathetic and seemingly inconsistent part because of its cold flightiness. Miss Hopkins pulls no punches, and resolves the role exquisitely in the final scene where Adeline wistfully faces the truth about what she is.

A Taste of Normality.

Roger Pryor is a salty oracle and a discerning friend as the partner of Margaret's dead husband. His capacity to be deeply shocked gives the play a taste of normality.

As Adeline's poet husband, Peter Cookson makes an effective Broadway debut. Playing down, he suggests exactly the engaging quality the character needs for the play's purposes.

Donald Oenslager provides a warmly appropriate Gramercy Sq. living room, and Elliott Nugent deals deftly with an inordinate number of false and real entrances and exits, telephone bells and distant musicians.